

Psalm 29 Against Baal

WHEN IT THUNDERS, IT IS THE VOICE OF THE LORD.

When Psalm 147 mentions various aspects of the weather, including the snow, the frost, and the hail, there is the statement: “He sends His word and melts them.” We are not accustomed to using the expression “the Word of God” in that way. When Jesus quoted the passage from Deuteronomy that man lives by every Word that proceeds from the mouth of the God, He also meant that we depend on everything that God has determined for us. In Psalm 29 there is repeated mention of “the voice of the Lord.” The context clearly suggests a thunderstorm! Look at verses 3-9:

The voice of the LORD is over the waters; the God of glory thunders; the LORD is over many waters. The voice of the LORD is powerful; the voice of the LORD is full of majesty. The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars, yes, the LORD splinters the cedars of Lebanon. He makes them also skip like a calf, Lebanon and Sirion like a young wild ox. The voice of the LORD divides the flames of fire. The voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness; the LORD shakes the Wilderness of Kadesh. The voice of the LORD makes the deer give birth, and strips the forests bare; and in His temple everyone says, “Glory!”

Tablets unearthed at Ras Shamra in Syria in 1928 included a number that dealt with Baal as the storm-god, who was thought to send lightning with thunder, as “his holy voice”, to the earth. One section reads:

Baal gives forth his holy voice; Baal discharges the utterance of his lips. His holy voice convulses the earth... the mountains quake, East and west, earth's high places reel. Baal's enemies take to the woods, His foes to the sides of the mountain.

There are similarities in concepts and language. We do not have to accept that one depends on the other. The Bible text stands in its own context, and should not be interpreted on the basis of pagan sources. However, both texts had a similar background. Further, the Bible was intended for people outside Israel, too. Again, it is proper for us to understand that the Psalmist is saying, “Not Baal, but the Lord, is the One who sends the rain clouds, the lightning, thunder, strong wind, and hail” The Israelites were only too familiar with the pagan notions that Baal was the husband, and the earth was his wife, whom Baal made fertile by sending the rain. To Baal was attributed the corn, wine, olive oil, and the other crops that provided food for people and animals. The Lord had already in the time of Moses warned the people of Israel against practices in Baal worship such as child sacrifice, and boiling a kid in its mother's milk (as an acceptable means of approaching a god).

All of this should help us to understand the task that faced Elijah. The three and a half-year drought that Elijah foretold to Ahab was meant to tell him that it was not Baal who controlled the weather, but the Lord. The Phoenician widow at Zarephath had been brought to despair, as her last flour and olive ran out. Phoenicia had been one of the sources of Baal worship in Israel. Jezebel had come from there, and her father was king there. Baal had been unable to provide food for the widow in the drought, but the Lord did so with ease.

The conflict between Elijah and the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel was a much deeper conflict between Baal and the Lord. Baal was unable to send down fire from heaven. He was supposed to be in control of the lightning! Baal's worshippers had been unable to maintain Baal's supremacy so that their life-sustaining crops could continue. The Lord, not Baal proved to be the controller of rain and storm. When the Lord sent fire down, it even burnt up the stones of the altar, and licked up the water in the trench around the altar. Then Elijah, the Lord's servant, climbed to the top of Mount Carmel, and put his face between his knees. As he prayed for rain, he kept sending his servant to look westward over the Mediterranean, until there was a report of a cloud, “as small as a man's hand” rising from the sea. Elijah sent a message to Ahab to get his chariot moving before the rain stopped him. The power of the Lord came on Elijah, as he ran ahead of Ahab all the way to Jezreel, in the heavy rain.

However, the Lord made it very clear to Elijah that He was not a carbon copy of Baal, only stronger. When Elijah was on Mount Sinai, three of the natural forces often associated with Baal occurred, a wind that split rocks, an earthquake, and a fire. But the Lord was not in them. The point was that the Lord was not constricted to the simplistic categories that people applied to Baal. He was above them, and did not need them. He spoke to Elijah in a gentle whisper.

The writer of I Kings makes a special point of drawing a number of parallels between Moses and Elijah. As the plagues in Egypt were really a contest between the Lord and the various Egyptian gods, who were supposed to control aspects of nature in Egypt, the drought, the fire from heaven, and the rain were aspects of the Lord's contest with the false god, Baal.

So back to Psalm 29. It begins: “Give unto the LORD, O you mighty ones, give unto the LORD glory and

strength.” The address ““mighty ones” is, literally, “sons of god” or “sons of gods.” They may be angels. They may be those who are foolishly thought to be gods. It doesn’t matter who. All must acknowledge the Lord as the divine King. In other words, when you hear the crashing thunder, think of it as the Lord’s voice. When we receive abundant rain, forget the talk about El Ninio, and meteorology, high and low pressures, and wind-directions. They are all forces of nature, but the Lord both uses them and is above them! The sound and fury of creation’s awesome displays are the glory of our God! Thank the Lord, who uses such forces, controls them, and is infinitely above them! By His Word the Lord ordered the creation in the formless deep (Gn 1:2, 6-10), and controlled the great flood at the time of Noah. He is still in control of the climate and the weather. Perhaps we can imagine Him chuckling over the weather forecasters’ predictions at times.

Like so many of the Psalms that mention the Lord’s control over nature, this one also moves from there to His mercy and His salvation. Psalm 147 does, and so does this one. Verses 10-11 read:

The LORD sits enthroned over the flood, and the LORD sits as King for ever.

The LORD will give strength to His people; The LORD will bless His people with peace.

His rule extends further than forces of nature. He is committed to saving His people and giving them spiritual blessings, their crowning comfort (peace) in a world where human beings, to the unspiritual eye, seem buffeted by threatening tides and uncertainties.